



There is always an alternative: Outlaws for contemporary resistance

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review of

Parker, M. (2012) *Alternative business: Outlaws, crime and culture*. London: Routledge. (PB, pp. 183, US\$50.95, ISBN 9780415586481)

Introduction: Alternatives as critique

TINA (There Is No Alternative) was one of the symbolic abbreviations of the 1980s. Whilst Margaret Thatcher used this phrase to praise her party's programme throughout 1970s and 1980s, in the following years TINA turned into an ideological symbol that her allies in the United States and around the globe mobilized against any sort of alternative idea or model. But, of course, there have always been alternatives to the corporation, to market managerialism and to monopoly capital. While we might point to families, churches, NGOs, cooperatives, charities, trust-owned organizations and state owned enterprises as some of the structures that underpin our diverse economies, there have been other alternatives perceived as less legitimate as well. However, that does not lessen the explanatory power of such alternatives regarding the nature of society, market and management. This book is about these organisations.

Martin Parker's point in studying supposedly 'outlaw' forms of organization is to challenge the ideological and moral basis of what we take to be common knowledge about organizations and management that is rehearsed and taught in places like business schools. 'Can you imagine studying in a biology department

which only teaches animals with four legs and omits the rest? Or getting a degree in history based on studying a part of 17th-century Staffordshire? This is what business schools are doing' (Parker, 2008). In other words, as market managerialism dominates management research and education (Parker, 2002), the place of alternative forms in management knowledge becomes marginalised. Hence, there is a need to confront such dominant views by demonstrating there are alternatives that may help us broaden our understanding and question taken-for-granted assumptions regarding markets, businesses, organisations and management.

This book brings together much of Parker's previously published work on so called 'outlaw' organizations. An entertaining and easy-to-read book, with an extensive bibliography, it touches upon core questions regarding the relationship between culture and economy. As such the book is primarily cultural analysis rather than a comparative study of formal and informal organizations; indeed, it questions such a division. Beginning with Robin Hood and moving onto chapters on pirates, the mafia, cowboys, robbers and gangs, the book offers a cultural analysis of the practices of outlaw organizing drawn from a number of stories, films and other texts about these 'villains'. In these chapters it is demonstrated in particular how the wild, untamed and violent characteristics of outlaws are tamed and turned into a source of fun through commodities and toys. Whilst we read this narrative of transformation of the reality to popular culture commodities and eventually to profit for big companies, we also notice how alternative organising may be studied as well. The book is organized in nine chapters and in the following I offer a short summary of each and then a discussion of the importance of the book for the field of critical management studies (CMS) and anarchism.

Outlaws: Where 'culture and economy', 'fact and fiction' and 'legitimate and illegitimate' intertwine

In the first chapter, Parker primarily introduces how the outlaw concept is open to debate and what an outlaw might represent. Drawing on arguments from Hobsbawm, he suggests how hard it is to differentiate between reality and myth associated with the historical outlaws such as Robin Hood. He then provides justification for writing about outlaws and invites us to expand our views of what is involved in 'economy', 'business' and 'organisations'. He argues that the best way to understand what outlaws have to say about economy and culture is to bring together disciplines and concepts that the mainstream social science would have us keep separate. Parker then defends the subjective methodological basis of the book (a point to which I return below).

In the second chapter Parker specifically focuses on the myth of Robin Hood. He takes him as a historical archetype and fictional character found in different cultures as a trickster who stands against the established power and injustice but mostly with limited subversive potential. He notes that in the UK the character began as an outlaw around the fourteenth century and turned into a noble bandit around the sixteenth century, a patriot against Normans, a romantic image against industrialization and a children's book hero around the nineteenth century, and a cultural commodity that is consumed all around the world today. Despite these diverse forms, Robin Hood's defining trait – a noble bandit fighting for the justice and right against the violent, arrogant and wealthy hegemonic power, on the side of the poor - provides a script upon which to demonstrate the counter culture characteristics in the fight against cruelty, inequality, injustice and oppression regardless of the facts and/or fiction. Many of these qualities are common to the other outlaws Parker dissects in later chapters.

The third chapter begins with the analysis of piracy in the golden age that originated in the Atlantic in 1700s. Depending upon the historical realities and sources of piracy, the author argues how international trade became an important intersectional point for emerging states, merchants and pirates. Parker traces the first representations of piracy to Daniel Defoe's work and its effect on subsequent writings showing particularly how cultural figures are commodified. (How about a political economy reading of *Pirates of the Caribbean*?). Alongside this, Parker discusses the sources and outcomes of the alternative anarchistic, proto-democratic organizational structures of piracy. He argues that this was in complete contrast with the existing arrangements of the navy and trade ships at that time. He suggests that this leads us to consider piracy as a form of utopia based on democratic and communal ideals while at the same time reminding us how such wild characters and their images are appropriated by the market forces. 'The character seems to embody a challenge in terms of the organisation of labour and the distribution of reward, and to occupy a historical moment when the legitimacy of states, merchants and international trade was not yet fully established. This gap, this power vacuum, even today provides iconography for imagining freedoms beyond those that market managerialism allows, and perhaps even forms of re-distribution that erase hierarchies of status and reward' (46). In the end however, Parker claims that pirates come to have the characteristics that we want to see in them as sadists, libertarians or outsiders.

The next chapter takes us from the sea to the landlubbing piracy of robbers, smugglers and highwaymen between 1600 and 1850. By drawing on historical books, pamphlets, novels, songs, plays and operas, Parker demonstrates how real outlaws became romanticised as products of popular culture and literature. He

notes that these characters represent an escape from crowded industrialized life and are examples of romantic nostalgia for the good old days before urbanized capitalism replaced feudal relations. Hence, robbers are characterized as rebellious people opposed to the centralized and bounded civilization and as supporters of rural justice promising new experiences outside the law. In the same way, smugglers are presented as those that struggle against the centralized structures and are lauded as the providers of cheap goods for local people. In the same vein, the well dressed, gentle and charming highwayman is pictured as a romantic character who stands up against the powerful or rich who may deserve to be robbed in the search for justice.

In chapter five, Parker moves to the other side of the Atlantic, to North America. Here he explores the historical characters of Native Americans, mountain men and, in particular, cowboys, how they were represented and how they stood against the established order. He focuses on the idea of 'the frontier' and how living beyond this built the mythical foundations of US society. He notes how mass communication created an economy based on the dissemination of stories about these figures who sought their fate and destiny in the Wild West. In this chapter, cowboys are portrayed as the outlaws of the West who sometimes work and sometimes steal, but mostly as individuals escaping to the nature and authenticity of the West from the civilized and industrialized East. Besides, as Robin Hood like folk heroes, with their moral codes they struggle with the powerful, rich and the corrupt, such as railroad tycoons or local politicians. Parker further focuses on the fine line between the good and the bad, and discusses the relationship between the law and legitimacy in the Wild West. In contrast to how West became materialized and commodified as a tourist attraction today, the chapter concludes with a discussion of the radical reading of Wild West in terms of what it really represents as localization, sustainability and smallness in resistance to rising capitalism.

In the next chapter the author takes the reader to the 20th century and locations such as New York and Sicily in order to analyse the mafia organization as an outlaw. We are offered a vision of how thin the line can be as we start comparing the mafia with modern business and the *Dons* (mafia leaders, fathers) with managers. Beginning with the similarities in terms of the product diversity, geographical spread, economy, durability, organizational culture and the rational manager, it is demonstrated how the mafia is not altogether dissimilar from legitimate businesses. 'My point here', Parker writes, 'is that much Mafia business is just ordinary business, and that the dividing line between Mafia business and some other "uncorrupted" business is actually rather difficult to see' (96). He notes how modern business conceptions of cohesion, inter-firm links, trust and co-operation may become key success factors for mafia. He then

explains how ‘the line that divides the Mafia from real business might be less about some sort of description of what a business organisation looks like, or what the Mafia looks like, and more about its methods of doing business’ (99). As a part of this analysis, we also see the competition of the mafia with the state over the use of violence and the priority of family (business). In the end, again, our author claims, we see what we want in these characters in popular culture such as in *The Sopranos* and *Scarface*. We find fantasies of often plush and exciting masculine worlds that help us escape our daily routines of organized and mundane work.

As we get closer to present day, Parker takes us to the times of noble robbers who are gentle, charming and having a class position in society, such as Arsene Lupin or Raffles. There are also others who once innocent but forced to live as outlaws to seek revenge or to fight for fair treatment. In the end we see outlaws with manners acting against the powerful, corrupt and abusive structures and unjust order. As an extension, particularly following the years of great depression, we also see the heroes of gangs such as Bonnie and Clyde or John Dillinger who become heroes to the people because they steal from the banks and the rich but not from the poor. Whilst reading the chapter, we notice, as they become famous, how popular culture (e.g. movies) embraces them and how, in turn, these outlaws use popular culture for their own benefit. The author also focuses on those gangs that are the predecessors of today’s organized crime. He discusses various versions of gangs from all over the world including Russia, Japan, Mexico and New Zealand, and their common characteristics in terms of doing businesses on the other side of the law. Even though Parker does not question the reason for their existence, he tends to demonstrate that their mythology has a sort of moral and political aspiration in terms of resistance to the powerful and the search for justice.

The following chapter deals with how popular culture is consumed in today’s workplaces in ways that help employees escape the suppressing nature of work. He discusses the popular culture artefacts such as coffee mugs, stickers, airport books, TV series, comics, ads and blockbuster movies in addition to anti-work or anti-boss websites. As a part of this, he problematizes studying organizations, their cultures and counter-cultures. As an alternative he suggests a cultural studies perspective in order to understand how dissent and resistance to capitalist economy, work and organization is culturally articulated and cuts through the dualisms of culture and economy, dissent and co-optation. Parker claims that the culture and counter-cultures of organizations are dialectically related and that there can be no superiority of one over the other. Hence, he warns us against totalizing, fetishizing or romanticizing representations of power or resistance. Accordingly, as resistance varies in terms of different contexts,

Parker concludes the chapter by highlighting how contested the nature of resistance and power relationships at work are and the ways in which outlaws are connected to such modern representations of resistance.

In the final chapter Parker considers possible criticisms of studying outlaws. He admits that outlaws are often violent, have masculine and macho characteristics and glorify theft and burglary. He claims that it is hard to draw borders between the constructs of legitimate/illegitimate, fact/fiction, economy/culture and co-optation/critique. As a part of this, Parker asks why we still maintain a place for the erstwhile criminals in popular culture. One reason, capitalism sells such artefacts to generate profit. But, he also reminds us of Durkheim's arguments on the role of deviance in helping society learn what it is to be normal and within the law. He also argues how outlaws actually symbolize fantasies and safety valves where the oppressed society searches for freedom and non-routine.

Having discussed the motives behind focusing on outlaws, he offers us typology of the analysed characters on the axes of countryside vs. urbanized and individualism vs. collectivism. But, for him, rather than this structural analysis, the counter-culture and its dynamics with respect to resistance promise much more to us. Indeed, according to him, it is worth finding the critical intentions in popular counter-culture. Finally, the author, again admitting how his methodological approach is very much subjective, defends outlaws as helping us write our hidden transcripts of resistance in times of global capitalism where we want to create our own utopias as opposed to taken-for-granted assumptions regarding work, organization, market and economy. These hidden transcripts do not involve confrontational questioning of the powerful or transformative actions about the macro mechanisms that we mostly complain about, but they help us resist, survive and struggle against the oppression, domination and routine of workplaces. However, it is not just about writing our transcripts, but also '...documenting this sort of popular cultural dissent with which is right in front of us is also to encourage speculation concerning the limits of, and alternatives to, market managerialism' (157) which takes us to another level of discussion.

Resistance via outlaws in contemporary business schools

With a mostly western and European orientation, it seems that Parker writes about his 'childhood heroes' (146), yet, it would be totally unfair to say the book is just about that. Alternative business may be read through different lenses thanks to his playful approach of transcending disciplinary divisions and extensive use of various resources including books, poems, pamphlets, texts, songs and movies. In a very simplistic way, we can read the book as a history of crime in

order to see the material basis and origins of outlaws that have been surrounding us for more than 700 years. We are referred to many historical texts and told of how the realities of crime turn into myths in time.

In another way, by blurring the boundaries of disciplines (history, economy, culture) and ambivalent positions of outlaws (legitimate-illegitimate, fact-fiction, co-optation-critique), Parker mostly characterizes the outlaws positively as the redistributers of wealth and justice. Referring to the general script of Robin Hood explained above, he mostly puts outlaws on the side of the poor, the weak, the local and the innocent, and, against the powerful, the corrupt, the rich, the hegemonic, the evil corporation and even the state. Hence, we can read the book as a cultural analysis of how we come to see the representations of outlaws as various products and outcomes of popular culture. While we see how outlaws become cultural symbols against power and authority that inspire the fantasies of the people, at the same time we are told how they are turned into sources of fun and lucrative commodities for corporations. This is actually directly related to the suggestion of Parker on how to approach 'popular political economy', which is one of the most important contributions of the book.

In terms of inspiring fantasies, we also see how the representations of all these outlaws help us escape from the reality of global capitalism, in the shape of the routine and exploitative work and organizational arrangements of today. In the discrepancies and paradoxes of the modern capitalist world, outlaws are our escape routes. Sometimes we want to be really free and not bounded by the routinized and dull structures of industrial/corporate world. And, sometimes, we want to be protected and secured with a family-like binding that would confront and challenge the injustices we have in these modern times. Or, alternatively, we want to punch our boss in the face or be honest about our feelings without any hesitation since s/he is never satisfied with our hard work and achievements. We want romantic and heroic figures such as Robin Hood, Tony Soprano, Jack Sparrow and Dilbert who would do all these things. As a result of such a demand capitalism gives us all these characters as consumable commodities, however, by stripping of their ethics and politics of resistance. Yet, Parker argues, there is still a potential to study these counter-culture, even anarchistic, characters to question taken-for-granted assumptions regarding authority, hierarchy and domination. This is where we come to our third approach.

In a third movement, within a CMS perspective, we can assume that, by focusing on outlaw organizations, the book demonstrates how to approach alternatives as a powerful tool for critique. Actually this is the point where we see traces of politics and efforts on opening up a new space for interrogation of orthodoxy in management knowledge. With a playful language, while talking on outlaws in

the front, actually, we notice the importance of thinking on possibilities of alternative forms of knowledge in business schools.

As outlaws are portrayed as anarchistic, rebellious counter-culture characters who have problem with authority and power, the legitimate and the established are problematized by Parker. 'We often refer to a thing called "the market", or "work", as if these were uncomplicated things, and the figure of the economic outlaw allows us to see how conceptions of markets and labour have been imagined, legitimated and policed' (157). Hence, the outlaws in the book become a sort of challenge for taken-for-granted and normalized structures including the state, the corporation and even management knowledge itself. At that point one may also ask why we should care about violent outlaws as alternatives, or, how they can help us to transform organizational settings in real life. One may, furthermore, think of the book as an intellectual exercise of an established management scholar and question the contribution of such knowledge. This is why he tries to justify his position in the first and the last chapters, as, of course, a subjective way of approaching outlaws as alternative business. As long as we see what we want to see in outlaws, Parker would like us to see the prospective hidden transcripts of resistance in the contemporary world of organizations and this is what the book is about. But, with an organizational perspective this is an obviously critical approach that helps question the orthodox assumptions and methods of studying and teaching formal organizations, particularly businesses. Hence, Parker demonstrates there is no one way to understand organizations. By telling of how alternatives can help broaden our perspectives, he questions and problematizes the common sense of 'business or the market as usual'. 'Alternative thinking', or 'thinking about and with alternatives', as critique contributes to realm of anarchistic efforts in the field of CMS by questioning the taken-for-granted authority of TINA in business schools. Therefore, the book and its characters do not just call our attention to the political economy of the popular, but also serve to the ideals of CMS with an anarchistic and alternative intention to challenge established management knowledge as of today.

Conclusion

Overall, whether you like it or not, the book promises that outlaws, as actors of alternative business, have the potential to mock the realities we experience today in the name of work, organization, hierarchy and management knowledge, even though this potential does not directly turn into confrontational or transformative action and stay remain as our hidden transcript or fantasy. And perhaps this is not the concern of such a book. Parker does not make a call for being an anarchistic outlaw, neither do I; but yes, against TINA there are alternative forms

of management knowledge and we seriously need to think about them, not just to dream and fantasize with the help of cultural representations but also to reflect on possible transformations and live a worthwhile life not squeezed among the cogs of (post)modern capitalist relations.

references

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